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AUTHOR	Arnold, Daniel S.; Goodloe, Audrey
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ABSTRACT

The amount of change that has occurred in schools is unimpressive when compared to the financial and human resources devoted to the change effort in recent years. A small number of innovations have succeeded--either by surviving in a "near-original" form or by leaving a residue of desirable change. The causal factors present in apparently successful attempts to significantly change school programs seems to be the following: (1) the innovation is a response to a locally recognized educational need or problem; (2) the relationship between the innovation and the problem is clear to administrators, teachers, policy-making boards, and parents; (3) the innovation is an appropriate response to the defined problem; (4) the local school is making a significant investment of resources in the project; (5) the school staff understands the rationale for the innovative program and is adequately prepared to perform the tasks required for its success; (6) supplementary services are adequate to support teachers in the classroom during the initial stages; (7) the evaluative criteria are appropriate to the innovation and are applied during the course of the program as well as at its conclusion; (8) the innovative program is started on a manageable scale; and (9) program leadership is capable and remains relatively unchanged throughout the implementation period. (Each of these factors is discussed in this pamphlet.) (PB)

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How To Innovate Successfully

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By DANIEL S. ARNOLD
Associate Dean for Teacher Education, College of Education, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Former High School Science Teacher, and
AUDREY GOODLOE
Fourth Grade Teacher, Cardinal Valley School, Lexington.

Most of us can point to a relatively small number of innovations that survived after the bright glow of newness had worn off. Of course, the survival of a program in a form that is reasonably faithful to the original model is not the only criterion of success. Even when a school abandons the original innovation, it is altogether possible that a residue of desirable change remains. One is forced, however, to concede that the amount of change that has occurred in schools is unimpressive when compared to the financial and human resources devoted to the change effort in recent years.

In general, the following seem to be the causal factors present in apparently successful attempts to change school programs significantly:

1. The innovation is a response to a locally recognized educational need or problem.

The road toward more effective schools is strewn with the wreckage of change attempts that failed because they lacked sufficient understanding or sympathy from administrators, faculty, policy-making boards, or parents.

If school leaders are interested in undertaking change attempts that are not in keeping with pre-

existing community and local professional priorities, then they will need to make extensive educational efforts to influence those opinions before initiating activities to implant the educational change.

2. The relationship between the innovation and the problem it is to attack is clear to administrators, teachers, policy-making boards, and parents.

The managerial tasks of mounting a significant new educational effort are so demanding that project leaders often neglect to communicate—except to the small circle of persons most directly involved—the subtleties of how a new school organization or curricular plan contributes to the solution of a defined problem.

When the chain of reasoning that justifies the innovation is highly theoretical, when the causal connection between problem and innovation involves several steps, or when successes are not apparent in a relatively short time, teachers, parents, and others tend to grow impatient and may subvert the effort out of their lack of enthusiasm. When understanding of the relationship between the problem and the innovation is absent, the innovation attempt may appear as change for change's sake. If innovators underestimate the complexity of that relationship, they may make unjustified assumptions about the participants' empathy.

3. The innovation is an appropriate response to the defined problem.

This appears so obvious as not to merit inclusion in a list of critical considerations, but we believe that this criterion is frequently not met in attempts to innovate. A current example of its violation relates to the teaching of basic learning skills to educationally disadvantaged children.

When a school recognizes the extent of this group's failure to learn to read, a not infrequent response has been to simply increase the time spent in reading instruction two-, three-, or tourfold. Stated another way, the school chooses to give the student a larger dose of the medicine that did not in the past effect a cure. That "innovation" has frequently and repeatedly failed to provide significant improvement.

Particularly in the years since schools have been under intense pressure to deal with complex social problems, the reaction has often been to seek out the most obvious and direct intervention possible to solve learning problems. If the base cause of the problem has not been thoroughly analyzed and understood, intervention of this sort may be no better than a random shot in the dark.

Often, of course, the knowledge base upon which one must proceed provides little insight into the root causes of the problems. When that is the case in a particular instance, then those associated with the attempt ought to be aware that this is the nature of the enterprise. The failure of an acknowledged high-risk program has considerably less deleterious impact than would be the case if

the program was believed to be a sure thing.

In any case, whether the new program is locally developed or is being transplanted from another locale, the wise innovator will search long and hard for evidence that the innovation attacks the cause of the problem he wishes to solve.

4. The local school is making a significant investment of resources in the project.

If an innovation is going to result in long-term modification of practice, then the school must have both financial and psychological capacity to sustain the program without supplementary funds from outside sources. Both financial and psychological commitments are easier to gain when the local school pays for what might be considered normal costs of the special project and restricts the use of supplementary funds from external grants to training teachers, acquiring extraordinary equipment, or providing whatever extraordinary services are necessary for the implementation effort.

Too frequently, teachers, building administrators, and others identify project staff as outsiders who, by virtue of operating with supplementary funds, do not function within the same constraints as do ordinary mortals. The perceived temporary nature of project staffs limits their impact on regular faculty.

Further, if the innovative project is totally or principally dependent upon special project funds, local personnel easily develop the

feeling that they are not responsible for sustaining it after the honeymoon of extramural funding is over.

5. The school staff understands the rationale for the innovative program and is adequately prepared to perform the tasks required for its success.

Since the classroom teachers are the persons most concerned with the application of instructional methodology, their special in-service training will usually concentrate upon techniques and methods. It is important, however, that they also get a clear understanding of the goals and theoretical base of the innovation because otherwise they may innocently do violence to the basic purposes of the program by adjusting classroom practices for expediency or efficiency.

An example of this sort of action is to be found in some elementary school team-teaching programs. Often, teams are assembled on the basis of compensating strengths and interests in the hope that the teacher who is especially strong in one area will have a beneficial effect on the development of teaching competency among the teachers who are less adequate in that subject area but are especially strong in some other area. However, not infrequently, when left to their own devices, teachers on a team essentially destroy this concept of a team by going to a departmentalized arrangement, with one member of the team teaching all the science; another, all the mathematics; and so on. It is possible that a more general under-

standing of the motives of the program would prevent this type of system breakdown.

Inadequate preliminary in-service training of teachers may doubly prejudice the chances of project success. The direct effect is, of course, that teachers and other professionals may be unable to perform adequately the required tasks associated with the program.

Insecurity in one's ability to perform as required is a second effect of the lack of adequate in-service training. It is of highest importance that the preliminary training be at the appropriate level and that supportive consultation be readily available to classroom teachers throughout at least the first cycle of a new program.

6. Supplementary services are adequate to support teachers in the classroom during the initial stages.

If the innovation is to have significant effect upon the instructional program of the school, redirection of teachers' activities and teacher retraining are required. It is unreasonable to expect teachers to fulfill full-time instructional responsibilities and to undertake the required training, planning, and developmental activities associated with large-scale change as well.

Even when supplementary pay is offered for evening or weekend involvement, the competition between continuing operations and innovative programs for the teacher's energy and attention is likely to be great. The success of the innovative effort is more likely when ways can be found to reduce

teacher's commitments to operating the continuing program during the period that an innovation is being installed. (This has been accomplished in some cases by hiring supplementary certificated teachers or paraprofessionals.)

For example, if the new program is pointed toward significant individualization of instruction, teachers will require greater planning and preparation time both during the installation period and in continuing operation afterward. Those additional requirements must be understood and provided for. In addition, a good many teachers have not been accustomed to use preparation time in the manner project leaders expect. Unless teachers receive adequate preparation in effective use of "planning periods," there is the possibility that they may see them merely as a time to do things they cannot do in a classroom full of pupils, such as catching up on instructionally related busywork.

7. The evaluative criteria are appropriate to the innovation and are applied during the course of the program as well as at its conclusion.

In the enthusiasm that is sometimes associated with an exciting new undertaking, participants occasionally tend to overestimate the positive effect the program might have. Public accountability pressures and eagerness to create a climate of enthusiasm for the innovation tend to result in totally unrealistic expectations for the program.

If the attainment of stated project goals is to be the criterion for

the short-term success of the program and the basis for the decision for its long-term retention, then it is critical to establish suitable goals and measures of goal achievement that can be achieved in the specified time period.

Experience indicates that educators are too likely to use conventional criteria, such as standardized achievement tests, to evaluate a project regardless of whether improvement of traditional academic performance represents the major thrust of the project.

Because the operational staff of an innovative program is often too close to the required day-to-day activities to make a valid assessment of the program, the staff and the planners need continuous objective feedback about how things are going. Such feedback will provide opportunity for program adjustment as problems arise and will thus enhance the probability of success.

8. The innovative program is started on a manageable scale.

When an instructional innovation appears to hold promise for the solution of educational problems, there may be a temptation to adopt it immediately on the widest possible scale. Certainly, administrators and policy making boards are sometimes reluctant to choose certain schools in a system or classes within a school to participate in a program as innovative sites, knowing that the choices may generate jealousy and ill will among those not chosen. There are, however, compelling reasons for starting innovations on a modest scale.

The first of these reasons is that since problems and their causes are not likely to be the same for all schools within a system, the same innovative program cannot be equally problem-specific for all schools in a sizable school system.

The second reason is that support services, such as teacher retraining and project leadership, may be impossible to supply on a large-scale basis. When those services are limited, the innovation is less likely to succeed.

9. Program leadership is capable and remains relatively unchanged throughout the implementation period.

The importance of adequate leadership for a significant change effort is obvious.

At a minimum, project leadership must possess considerable intellectual skills, plus a high level of human relations skills and managerial abilities. All of these need not be possessed by a single individual, but they must exist among persons in project leadership roles.

A common problem of innovative efforts, especially those that catch the attention of the professional education press, is that project directors are often lured away from the project to new positions while the innovative effort is still in critical stages. Under the best of circumstances, changes in project leadership generate some shifts of emphasis, direction, or procedure that may alter the nature of the innovation and inhibit its development.

School system leaders (supervisors, administrators, and policy-

making boards) face a dilemma in deciding whether or not to attempt significant change efforts.

On the one hand, the rate and direction of change in the world and society require reexamination and redirection of educational program and methodology on a broad scale and at a rapid pace. On the other hand, the failure of innovative programs may cost more than is immediately apparent in terms of a net loss of self confidence of the professionals involved as well as a probable loss of community confidence in the schools.

When a school system experiences failure in a change attempt, the position to which the school retrenches may be more conservative than the original starting point. Certainly, a new effort to effect large-scale change after a sizable failure will be more difficult to initiate.

In the broad view that we have attempted to take of the change process in the complex environment of the school, shared decision making stands out as the single most promising means of moving toward flexible, responsive schools. If a reasonable level of consensus concerning the priority problems of a school can be reached by interested persons of diverse backgrounds in the community, then the remaining obstacles to effective change are much easier to overcome. □

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